

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

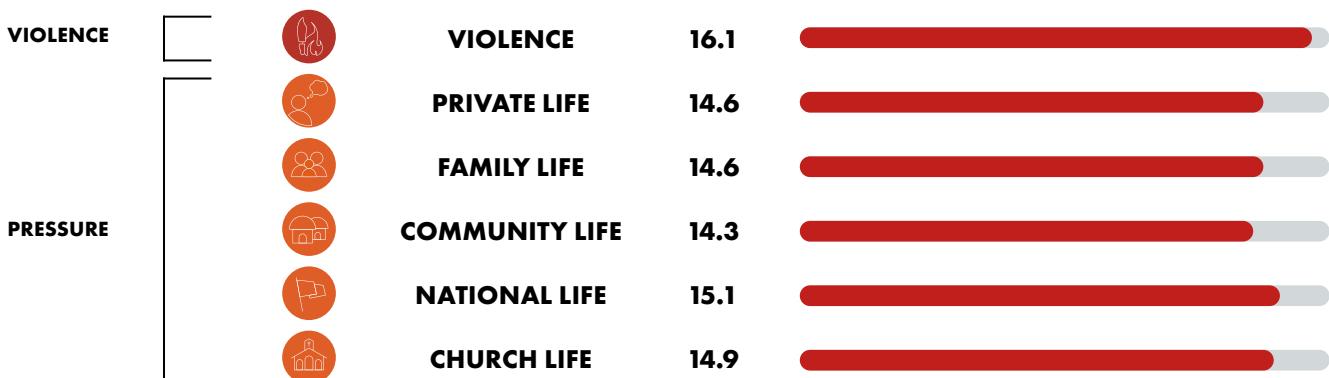
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
6

SYRIA



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, jihadist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led forces have largely controlled Syria. Amid widespread disorder and weak governance, Christians report unprecedented levels of persecution since ISIS control, including sharp rise in deaths and attacks on churches." The new interim constitution, proclaimed in March 2025, centralizes power in the presidency and, stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is the primary source of legislation, lacking sufficient protections for minorities. At the same time, social pressures and sectarian tensions are on the increase, as evidenced by deadly clashes in March and July 2025, that primarily affected Alawites and Druze, while Christians also suffered casualties. The resurgence of military operations by Islamic State since October 2024, including a deadly attack on a church in Damascus in June 2025, further reinforces the sense of insecurity. Although the partial lifting of international sanctions offers economic prospects, it is still too early to assess the actual impact of the recovery efforts on Christian communities.

Quick facts

LEADER

Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa

POPULATION

25,427,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

300,000 (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	300,000	1.2
Muslims	24,646,000	96.9
Agnostics/Atheists	477,000	1.9
Others	4,000	0.0
Total		100%

Source¹

Since gaining independence in 1946, Syria has faced political instability, military coups and conflict. The Assad family ruled from 1970 until December 2024, when HTS-affiliated forces led, by interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa, captured Damascus, ending decades of secular Ba'athist rule and ushering in an Islamist-oriented government. This shift drastically changed the political, social, and security conditions for religious minorities.

Throughout the civil war, Christians suffered disproportionately from fighting and displacement. Their vulnerability stemmed from lack of political and military power, alleged ties to the West, and perceived closeness to the Assad regime. Under the new interim government, these risks have intensified, exposing Christian communities to targeted violence, discrimination, and social marginalization.

The March 2025 interim constitution centralizes power in the president and establishes Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation, but experts note it offers insufficient protection for minorities. Political power remains fragmented, with sectarian and militant actors gaining influence. Continued armed confrontation, including Islamic State attacks such as the June 2025 church bombing in Damascus, have further exacerbated insecurity.

Economically, infrastructure collapse, prolonged sanctions, and capital flight have weakened livelihoods and eroded community cohesion. After more than 14 years of conflict, approximately 90% of Syrians lived below the poverty line in 2024, up from a third before the war. The partial lifting of sanctions in mid-2025 has opened reconstruction and commercial channels, but its impact on Christian communities remains uncertain. Direct benefits for Christians are limited due to ongoing instability, asset loss, emigration, and a fragile rule of law.

Widespread inciting speech on social media exacerbates the insecurity and isolation of Christians, while social pressure and sectarian norms significantly restrict their freedom in education, clothing choices and social interactions. Under the new government, Syrian education is being reformed according to Islamic ideology, eliminating pre-Islamic history and gender equality, and incorporating Quranic interpretations that negatively reference Jews and Christians, fostering hostility. Critics see this as an effort to Islamize education and redefine Syrian identity.

¹ Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

In October 2025, Syria held tightly controlled indirect parliamentary elections through regional electoral colleges, resulting in minimal minority representation, with only one Christian elected.

Overall, the Christian minority now faces a serious level of persecution, insecurity, and the erosion of civil and religious freedoms, marking one of the most challenging periods in modern Syrian history.

How the situation varies by region

The pressure on Christians in Syria varies greatly by region. In the north-east (Al-Hasakah, Qamishli), the situation is relatively safe under Kurdish rule, while smaller Christian communities on the coast are moderately vulnerable to social pressure. In cities like Damascus and Aleppo, Christians experience increased pressure from extremist groups and conservative Muslim communities. The hardest-hit areas are Idlib and some northern zones under Turkish influence and ISIS cells, where displacement and fear prevail. In central Syria, such as Homs and the Wadi al-Nasara area, pressure is also high due to inadequate security and intimidation by extremists.



Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not scored separately in the WWL scoring and analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Historical Christian communities—with the Orthodox as the largest, followed by Melkite Catholics—face increasing pressure from both the current regime and extremist groups. Challenges include bureaucratic delays affecting activities or renovations, constant surveillance and targeted threats against religious leaders and churches. Churches are subjected to insults, bombings and intimidation, including leaflets demanding conversion or jizya. Perceived historical ties to the previous regime exacerbate risks, especially for the Orthodox Church.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Christians of Muslim or Druze background face strong family and societal pressure, especially in Sunni-majority areas, where conversion can lead to serious violence or expulsion. Rising Islamist radicalization has intensified resistance to converts from Muslim backgrounds.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations face significant pressure due to limited legal recognition, perceived Western orientation, evangelistic activities among Muslims and admitting Muslim converts, making them vulnerable to closure, surveillance and restrictions. They also face tension from traditional churches viewing them as foreign competitors.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Since the fall of Assad, Islamic oppression, already the leading cause of persecution, has intensified, particularly by jihadist groups. Christians face conversion pressure, attacks on churches, social pressure to wear headscarves, the removal of Christian symbols and verbal intimidation.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Dictatorial paranoia continues to drive Christian persecution under the new regime. Religious and political freedoms are being curtailed through repression, surveillance, control of churches and the arrest of critical activists to maintain absolute authority. Although security forces openly provide protection during prayer times, their presence often reflects broader state control over religious life rather than a genuine commitment to safeguarding worshippers.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Following Assad's fall, the absence of state security has led Syrians to increasingly rely on tribal protection. Tribalism, intertwined with Islam, especially in Northern Kurdish and central desert regions, considers conversion from Islam to Christianity treason, leading to fierce opposition from families and local leaders. Sheikhs (tribal or clan leaders) can impose punishments, including property confiscation, beatings or even execution of converts.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

The HTS takeover led to chaos and lawlessness, including prison breaks, fueling high crime amid poverty and a dysfunctional justice system. Christians are vulnerable due to limited tribal or political protection. They are often targeted for theft, extortion, kidnapping and violence. Despite the reduced visibility of traditional corruption under the new regime, weak institutions and a lack of accountability allow armed gangs to operate with impunity and violence. Despite the reduced visibility of traditional corruption under the new regime, weak institutions and a lack of accountability allow armed gangs to operate with impunity.

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM

In Syria, historic churches, particularly the Greek Orthodox, retain dominant influence, often limiting the role of smaller or non-traditional denominations. These groups face exclusion from gatherings, accusations of heresy or proselytism and social pressure. Internal rivalries and institutional protectionism weaken their influence, while some non-traditional Christians are accused of supporting Western political agendas, making them more vulnerable to persecution.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In a context of ongoing instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk abduction, sexual harassment and rape by radical groups and individuals. Field sources report that threats, attempted (sexual) assaults and the fear of abduction persist, particularly during clashes and in unstable areas. A country expert noted that “there are hardly any safe spaces for women and girls,” highlighting their exposure to sexual violence at checkpoints, workplaces and on public transportation. Cultural stigmas and the fear of reprisals deter victims from reporting assaults. Female converts also face violence from their own families and can be forced into marriage with a Muslim. If already married, they may be divorced and denied custody of their children.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Enforced religious dress code

- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Unemployed Christians struggle to find work, and those employed face discrimination and limited promotion prospects. Converts encounter threats, beatings or disinheritance from their families, while men from a Muslim background face pressure to marry a Muslim woman. These combined pressures drive continued emigration and weaken Christian communities in Syria.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	6	90
2025	18	78
2024	12	81
2023	12	80
2022	15	78

Syria's overall score has risen sharply by 12 points, from 78 to 90 points, primarily due to a significant increase in violence, which has reached an extremely high level. Key factors include attacks on churches, the closure of Christian schools in the north-east and a rise in Christian fatalities. Pressure on Christians has grown because of heightened insecurity and lawlessness following the regime change in December 2024. The expansion of local militias and other armed actors has increased intimidation, extortion and targeted attacks. Many churches have curtailed their activities for security reasons, especially after the deadly attack on a church in Damascus in June 2025. The attack has led many Christians to stop attending church, while the broader threat of further attacks and rising Islamist radicalism has driven believers to hide Christian symbols and avoid any public display of their faith, especially in majority Islamic areas or at checkpoints. The attack has led many believers to stop attending church and to avoid any public display of their faith.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- 18 December 2024:** The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in Hama was attacked by unidentified gunmen. Church property and religious symbols (crosses) were destroyed, a nearby Christian cemetery desecrated and graves vandalized, forming part of a wider pattern of violence and extrajudicial attacks in Hama since 5 December 2024.
- 22 June 2025:** A suicide attack on the Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus killed 22 Christians during the church service, wounded 63 and caused severe damage to the historic church building. The Syrian government attributed the attack to an IS cell.
- September 2025:** Kurdish authorities closed 14 private Christian schools in northeast Syria for refusing the new Kurdish curriculum, leaving thousands of Christian children without education. The decision has caused anger and fear among Christian communities, as it is seen as altering local history and restricting access to Syrian universities, leading some families to consider leaving the region.



WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians physically or mentally abused
2026	>27	100*	>10*	100*
2025	0	4	>10*	>10*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Syria is highly contested and can result in social exclusion, eviction, intimidation, physical violence or even murder. Since the fall of Assad, Christians have increasingly concealed crosses and other Christian symbols to avoid threats or violence from extremists or security forces. For converts, displaying Christian symbols carries significant personal risk within both family and community contexts. In Qamishli, under Kurdish administration, the public display of Christian symbols is relatively safer.

FAMILY LIFE

Converts from Islam to Christianity in Syria cannot enter a recognized Christian marriage, and without an Islamic marriage, both the union and children are considered illegal. In divorces between a Muslim and a Christian, Sharia law often favors the Muslim party, typically granting custody of children to the Muslim parent. In public schools, Christian children face pressure to attend Islamic lessons especially when no Christian teacher is present. Syria's curriculum has been Islamized, replacing nationalist and Assad-era content, reframing history through a religious lens and removing female figures.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians in Syria face growing pressure to renounce their faith. Converts from Muslim, Alawite and Druze backgrounds are at the highest risk, facing social, familial and sometimes violent threats. Loudspeaker equipped vehicles calling for conversion to Islam have circulated in Christian neighborhoods of Damascus,

creating tension and controversy. Christian students encounter discrimination and restrictions on religious expression. In September 2025, 14 Assyrian private schools in AANES were forced to close for refusing the mandatory Kurdish nationalist curriculum, which would have barred students from attending universities elsewhere in Syria.

NATIONAL LIFE

In March 2025, Syria adopted a provisional constitution designating Sharia law as the primary source of legislation. While the country nominally recognizes human rights and religious diversity, Sharia law favors Muslims over other groups. State media prioritizes Islamic content and ignores Christians, while local and social media accuse them of loyalty to the former regime. Christians face significant societal and security pressures, including fear of extremist groups, a general lack of protection and intimidation on social media, leading to widespread self-censorship.

CHURCH LIFE

In 2025, Christians in Syria face severe restrictions on their church life. Attacks, threats and the presence of violent Islamist groups have generated widespread fear and trauma, often resulting in the curtailment or cancellation of church and extracurricular activities, including gatherings, summer camps and diaconal projects. Church organizations that speak out against persecution risk threats, defamation or closure. Political instability, limited protection and ongoing chaos create a persistent climate of uncertainty and fear within Christian communities.



International obligations & rights violated

Syria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#))*
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#))
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ([CAT](#))
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#))

Syria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized by their family and community and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians in northern Syria are killed in violent attacks by revolutionary and paramilitary groups with an Islamist agenda (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts are monitored by local officials upon request of their own families (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are denied custody rights of their children because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 23 and 26)
- Christian female converts cannot marry Christian men and if they do, their marriage is considered illegal (CEDAW Art. 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Many other religious minorities face various levels of persecution including Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis and Zaradashtis. Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized and persecuted by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical but, in the case of the Alewites, because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents. Yazidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions, which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni Muslims and they learn Islam in school.



Open Doors in Syria

Open Doors is encouraging the local church through strengthening its leadership and helping them take advantage of the many opportunities for ministry, even in the ongoing crisis situation in the country. It does so in cooperation with local church partnerships. Opportunities include the following:

- Literature distribution: Bibles, Study Bibles, Children's Bibles, New Testaments, and Christian books
- Training: Including discipleship training for leaders so they might teach others; Leadership training in general and specific for youth leaders
- Trauma counseling and debriefing for people who have gone through very stressful situations; training youth, women, men and married couples
- Partnering with the local Church to care for and provide relief aid to the most needy
- Building bridges between the various Christian denominations by sponsoring conferences to which all denominations are invited
- Ministry training on healthy relationships
- Micro businesses and vocational training for believers
- Raising prayer support for believers in difficult situations and prayer for the situation in general



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Some photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.